

Why Feelings Matter & What To Do With Them

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“Although many of us may think of ourselves as thinking creatures that feel, biologically we are feeling creatures that think.”

—Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, Neuroscientist

1. Understanding the Purpose and Value of Your Emotions

In our society we undervalue emotion. It's often viewed as a nuisance. Words are frequently applied to it like “sappy,” “mushy,” or “schmaltzy.” Emotion is often thought of as childish, effeminate or weak. It's considered the antithesis of thought.

We have a tendency to assume that smart people aren't emotional people, and emotional people aren't smart. The reality is that the smartest people are those who use their emotions to help them think and who use their thoughts to manage their emotions. The key is to use emotion in a healthy balanced way.

Listen to what your feeling is telling you, and then figure out a way to act upon to to better your situation, your life or the work around you. Many of the most valuable scientific discoveries were made because a scientist was passionate about his or her subject. The scientist's passion might be driven by grief, for example, or by a wish to discover a way to help a loved one who's suffering. But most successful people are driven by feelings.

Feelings are basic to us

Neuroscientists have extensively the evolutionary development of the human brain. For humans, the ability to feel emotion evolved millions of years before the ability to think. Human emotions originate in the limbic system, which is buried deep below the cerebral cortex, the section of the brain where thought originates. In this way, **our feelings are a more basic part of who we are than are our thoughts.**

They're a physiological part of our bodies, like fingernails or knees. **Our emotions cannot be erased and will not be denied, any more than we can erase or deny our hunger or thirst, our elbows or our earlobes.**

Why did emotion evolve in the first place? Sometimes, especially to emotionally neglected people, emotions feel like a burden. Wouldn't it be better if we didn't have to feel sad when we had a conflict with a friend, angry when someone cut us off in traffic, or anxious before a job interview? On the surface, maybe it would seem easier if we didn't have to feel those things. But my belief is that if we didn't have emotions, life would not be better. In fact, it would not be sustainable.

Emotion is necessary for survival. Emotions tell us when we are in danger, when to run, when to fight and what is worth fighting for.

Emotions are our body's way of communicating with us and driving us to do things. Here are some examples of the purposes of just a few emotions:

<u>Emotion</u>	<u>Function</u>
Fear	tells us to escape/self—preservation
Anger	pushes us to fight back/self—protection
Love	drives us to care for spouse, children, others
Passion	drives us to procreate, create and invent
Hurt	pushes us to correct a situation
Sadness	tells us we are losing something important
Compassion	pushes us to help others
Disgust	tells us to avoid something
Curiosity	drives us to explore and learn

You get the idea. For every emotion, there is a purpose. Emotions are incredibly useful tools to help us adapt, survive and thrive.

People who were emotionally neglected were trained to try to erase, deny, push underground, and in some cases, be ashamed of, this invaluable built-in feedback system. Because they are not listening to their emotions, they are operating at a disadvantage from the rest of us. Pushing away this vital source of information makes you vulnerable and potentially less productive. It also makes it harder to experience life to its fullest.

Emotions do more, though, than drive us to do things. **They also feed the human connections that give life the depth and richness that make it worthwhile.** It is this depth and richness which I believe provides the best answer to the

question, “What is the meaning of life?” Emotional connections to others help us stave off feelings of existential angst.

Question(s)

1. *How much do you tend to judge your emotions and suppress them as a nuisance?*

2. Identifying and Naming Your Feelings

Many people have little awareness of their emotions. Undifferentiated, internalized feelings can fester inside of us, emerging only as anger and irritation.

Emotions do a variety of interesting things when they are pushed underground or ignored. They can:

- Become physical symptoms like GI distress, headaches or back pain
- Turn into depression, causing problems with eating, sleeping, memory, concentration or social isolation
- Sap your energy
- Cause you to explode at random times, or blow up “over nothing”
- Aggravate anxiety and/or panic attacks
- Keep your friendships and relationships superficial and lacking in depth
- Make you feel empty and unfulfilled
- Cause you to question the purpose and value of your life.

Speak them

The first step to stopping (or preventing) any of the above from happening to you is **learning to recognize your feelings and put them into words**. There is something magical about saying, “I feel sad,” “I am frustrated,” or “You hurt me when you did that.”

When you identify and name your feelings to yourself or to another person, you are taking the wheel and stepping on the gas. You are taking something from the inside and putting it on the outside. **You are making the unknown known. You are taking charge.** You are making the most of a valuable resource: Your emotions, your fuel for life.

3. Learning to Self-Monitor Your Feelings

Identifying and putting words to feelings is a skill. Just like any other skill, it has to be worked at, and it requires a lot of effort to develop.

Here we will learn an exercise that will help you do just that. When you are first practicing this exercise, it will be important to **be in a room alone, free from all distraction.**

Step 1. Close your eyes. Picture a blank screen that takes over your mind, banishing all thoughts. **Focus all of your attention on the screen, turning your attention inward.**

Step 2: Ask yourself the question:

“What am I feeling right now?”

Step 3: Focus on your internal experience. **Be aware of any thoughts that might pop into your head, and erase them quickly.** Keep your focus on:

“What am I feeling right now?”

Step 4: Try to identify feeling words to express it. You may need more than one word.

Step 5: If you're having difficulty identifying any feelings, **skim through the Feeling Word List** in the Resources and see if one or more words jump out at you.

Step 6: When a feeling word seems like it may be accurate, you are ready to move on to the next step, which is trying to figure out why you are feeling that.

So now ask yourself:

“Why would I be feeling right now?”

Determining the reasons behind a feeling can be very difficult for many people, but especially for those with Emotional Neglect. Asking yourself questions about the feeling can help you to understand why you are feeling it.

So let's use an example here to illustrate how you might go about this. Let's suppose that the feeling you identified is sadness.

Again, close your eyes again, turn your attention inward, and ask yourself as many of the following questions as needed to develop an understanding of the feeling.

“What is going on in my life right now that might make me feel sad?”

“Did something happen recently to upset me?”

“Has something sad or troubling from the past been brought back up by recent events?”

“Is this feeling of sadness familiar to me?”

“**Have I felt this sadness often before?**”

“If so, when and why?”

“Is this an underlying feeling that’s often with me?”

“**If so, what’s happened in my past that may have caused it in the beginning?**”

This exercise may seem simple, but it is not easy. **Emotionally neglected people often have great difficulty sitting with themselves**, and that is a requirement for this exercise to work. If it seems very hard when you first attempt it, or even impossible, you must keep trying.

Some people have found it helpful to take a yoga or meditation class to help build the internal focus skills that are so important here. You are forcing your brain to perform several activities that are novel. In essence, **you are forging new neural networks which get stronger and perform better and better each time you do it**, even when you are not successful.

Record your feelings at least two times per day. The goal will be to gradually become more able to focus inward, so that you will be naturally tuned in to your emotions as they occur.

When this awareness starts to happen, you will finally have access to all the power that your emotions bring you. And you will be released from the destructive, burdensome labor of suppressing them.

If it’s hard to keep doing it or you fear you’re not doing it well enough, [remember that change is always uncomfortable and it takes time to learn new skills].

Now that you have your emotions, we are ready to learn what to do with them.

4. Accepting and Trusting Your Own Feelings

If you were emotionally neglected, chances are you have difficulty with accepting and trusting your feelings. Some emotionally neglected people are completely unaware of the existence of emotions (like Cal), Others push their emotions down because they have a deep-seated notion that emotions are bad, will burden other people, or can make them a bad person. Remember the following three rules:

1. There is no bad emotion.

Emotions themselves are not good or bad, right or wrong, moral or immoral. Every human being has felt rage, jealousy, hate, destructiveness, and superiority, for example, at one time or another. Most people have even had homicidal feelings. These feelings themselves are not bad, and do not make us a bad person. It's what you do with them that matters. Do not judge yourself for your feelings. Judge yourself for your actions.

2. Feelings do not always make rational sense, but they always exist for a good reason.

Emotions do not follow the principles of logic. They can seem inexplicable and unpredictable. But every emotion can be explained if you try hard enough. With every emotion, our body is trying to send us a message, no matter how bizarre that may seem. As an example, let's consider David, a forty-something businessman who had zero supervision as a child.

David once shared with me that he occasionally felt an unbeatable disgust and repulsion when he saw a random person eating in a restaurant. He was mystified by this feeling, and worried that it might mean he was crazy.

Eventually, through a lot of exploration of his Emotional Neglect, he figured out the reason: David's limbic system, unbeknownst to him, was equating eating, the taking in of food, with nurturance. David himself took no enjoyment from food. He had great difficulty letting himself enjoy nutritional nurturance as well as emotional nurturance.

Unconsciously, he felt disgusted when he saw someone letting down their guard, and allowing themselves to enjoy taking in nurturance. This is an example of a feeling that seems on the surface irrational and meaningless, but was actually quite meaningful, and existed for a very good reason.

3. Emotions can be very powerful, but they can be managed.

Emotions that are hidden tend to have a lot of power over us. When we are aware of an emotion, we can then take charge of it. David felt at the mercy of his intense feeling of disgust, and sometimes avoided going to restaurants in order to avoid that feeling. Once he realized the source of the feeling and didn't judge himself for having it, he was at a point of full awareness and acceptance. He started to fight it off, and the feeling of disgust lost its potency. Eventually it disappeared altogether.